

Chapter 694 Lockpicking Mages

Ilea cracked her neck, ripping out the last few spears stuck in her chest before she threw them aside. “Thanks darling,” she said, smiling at the tree. The last few liters of blood flowed into the black grass covered earth below.

“Of course, *Lilith*. Whatever it is you require,” the being said.

She looked at the ground. “Do you actually drink all that? Can’t say I’m thrilled about that.”

“What do you mean? Is that not the pact we made? Your blood for my endless knowledge?” the tree asked. “Many children will be born of your sacrifice.”

“You know I never know when you’re joking with shit like that,” Ilea said and stretched.

“I do use it to feed certain beings in the area, some unable to sustain themselves from time to time. I assumed you wouldn’t mind,” spoke the Meadow.

“I don’t. Donating blood is important. Happy to give some flesh too if it helps,” she said.

“I didn’t know you could shed,” the tree said.

Ilea huffed and rolled her eyes before she checked her notifications.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 12’

‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 23’

‘ding’ ‘Monstrous reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Telepathy reaches lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9’

‘ding’ ‘Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2’

“That one circle did more than this entire forest for the past hours,” she mused.

“I presume you hadn’t seen it before,” the Meadow spoke.

Ilea summoned her armaments and healed the heavy damage it had sustained. *“Sorry buddy,”* she said, tapping the living armor. She glanced to the tree. *“Can living armor actually awaken? Like develop its own essence, conscience, mana, or whatever else is necessary?”*

“Your Primordial Shift is far stranger than the prospect you suggest,” it said. *“However, I think it unlikely. But with you, that doesn’t mean much.”*

“Breaker of reality and all, eh?” she mused.

“Quite infuriatingly so, yes,” the Meadow sighed.

“Says the eldritch being,” Ilea retorted.

“Just because you fail to comprehend something doesn’t mean it’s incomprehensible. Your spells are the same, but while I might make sense of it some day, you will already have new abilities,” it said. The being sounded excited, annoyed, tired, and hopeful at the same time.

Ilea smiled and walked towards the others. *“And that’s why you like me. New puzzles.”*

The Meadow sent a wave of space magic past her. Perhaps the equivalent of waving her off.

“We’re leaving everyone,” she said. Monster Hunter made her voice and intent travel through the spacious cavern. *“Where are the Elders?”*

“Verena says they are ready to leave in five minutes. Dragonkiller Pierce is currently locked in a card game with high stakes. It appears most of her accumulated wealth is in the pool. I estimate her chance to win at around two percent,” the Meadow spoke.

“Just don’t let her murder everyone once she loses,” Ilea said and smiled at Owl and the enchanters. She raised a finger to her cheek and teleported to the smith. *“Ah... before I forget. Goliath, I have something for you. Maybe you can use it to improve my armaments. Also thought about it being useful to Kyrian once he’s back,”* she said and summoned the Soul Warden machines and half the swords she had taken from them. *“Those especially might be interesting to him, or at least whatever enchantment or power is within them. I can even use the flame of creation with the blades.”*

A few of the blades and two machines vanished instantly. *“Rent,”* the Meadow said.

“Rent?” Ilea asked.

The smith didn’t react, wholly focused on taking in the heap of metal. *“I will do as you suggest, mother of ash.”*

“Mother of ash?” Ilea asked but shook her head before he could answer. *“Forget it. Yeah, I’ll let Kyrian know about it.”*

She focused on the mark and sent a message. *“New metal at Meadow’s. Check with Goliath whenever. Hugs, Lilith.”*

“Thanks. Will check in later. Don’t hug, it kills people,” the metal mage sent back.

Yeah, but not you hopefully, Ilea thought. *Maybe I should give him a charged fruit press hug next time we meet,* she mused, tapping her lower lip before she moved over to the gathered group.

The Shades bowed as they had before, not a word spoken.

“*Stop it with the bowing please,*” she said to only them before she glanced up. “Do you want to come as well by the way?” she added, looking at Aki.

The Pursuer jumped down from the wall and landed in a low crouch, the motion smooth before his bladed arms molded themselves into rapiers. “There is much I have yet to learn.”

“Sure, but you can continue afterwards. I doubt we’ll be there for a long time,” Ilea informed. “And you might get some actual combat experience, heaven knows you lack it.”

“If you think it reasonable, and myself not a burden, I shall accept,” the Pursuer said and bowed lightly.

Ilea laughed. “You’re literally past level eight hundred.”

“And you faced the Meadow,” the dagger deadpanned with glowing eyes.

“Fair enough,” Ilea said after a moment of consideration. “I am pretty awesome.”

“Hmm,” Aki mused as he moved closer with fast steps. “Perhaps I should travel with you again. It seems your growing power has infected your mind.”

“It’s just her Earth Magic Resistance,” Iana said with a yawn. “Prevents her from staying grounded.”

Owl made a weird noise, her eyes flickering with purple light.

“High Enchantress, good morning,” Aki said.

“Morning, Aki. Ilea, why do you have to scream like that,” the woman asked while rubbing her eyes.

“I forgot you were sleeping. My apologies, High Enchantress,” Ilea said and mimicked Aki’s bow.

“You better be,” Iana said.

How did she sleep through the entire battle before? Ilea wondered. Noise canceling enchantments probably. But Monster Hunter got through?

“Is it fair to assume that an outside party would consider this group... strange?” Owl asked, glancing between the beings.

Balduur joined them again, his steps nearly skipping. “Strange doesn’t even come close, Greater Lich. I’m nearly certain I’m dreaming, or dead.”

“Your essence is untouched and healthy, young dwarf,” Owl said in a joyous voice.

He nodded while taking in a deep breath. “Wonderful. Yes. Thank you.”

“Uncursed and blessed with youth,” Ilea mused.

“You shut it, goddess,” the dwarf said. “Oh wait... what...,”

“Hmm?” Ilea asked, tilting her head a little to the side.

He looked at her and squinted his eyes. “I just got a level in Veteran.”

She laughed. “It is indeed very brave of you to offend me, fool.”

Three Elders of the Shadow’s Hand appeared nearby, perhaps the most normal looking people in the group. From a human perspective at the very least.

“Noooo! The next draw would’ve-” Pierce fumbled, her face red as she stepped over to Verena and grabbed her shoulder. “A small loan, please. I can’t leave like this!”

The Berserker stared back before she burst into flames.

Pierce held on for a few seconds before she stepped back. She gave a glance to Lucas and reconsidered, turning instead to Ilea before she vanished and appeared right in front of her.

Ilea displaced the woman as far away as she could and clapped her hands. “You made it. Lucas do you want to join as well?”

“I will return to my work. I’m sure that... whatever it may be... this group is more than suitable to deal with it,” he said as he looked at the beings.

“Probably, yes,” Ilea mused. “*I’ll bring the kids back later.*”

“*Don’t lose any of them. You’ll be the one responsible,*” the teacher reminded.

“*Of course Meadow. But if I don’t get some practice in, how will I ever become a guardian of reality like yourself?*” she asked and activated her third tier teleportation, connecting everyone except for Lucas.

The fabric shifted and a moment later they stood once more in the Shining Caves. With reinforcements to take on the Soul Forge’s defensive fields of enchantments.

“Wow... it’s beautiful!” Iana exclaimed, her and Christopher carefully approaching the cube as magic flowed through them.

Aki moved up through the air and checked the perimeter, two void cannons at the ready.

The others spread out slowly, Bralin and the Elders preparing for battle.

“Owl, care to take a look as well?” Iana said, looking back towards the Lich.

Ilea approached with her, the two Shades further back.

“First impression?” Ilea asked and sat down on the stairs, a meal summoned into her hands.

Christopher smiled. “It’s good that you got us before fiddling with any of this. It’s quite... extensive.”

“Comparable to some of the more complex meshes the Meadow showed us. Just that this one is nowhere near as stable. Any wrong tampering will set it off,” Iana said and got to work.

Ilea enjoyed her meal. She was impressed with the demeanor of the enchanters. Both had grown in level since she had brought them to Ravenhall, neither near two hundred yet but she knew they were at least not only working. That or they gained so much skill experience from the Meadow’s teachings and their experimentation that they had jumped twenty levels each.

They wore armor that looked similar to their previous sets but most certainly enhanced in some ways. She assumed the Dark One smith was responsible, either offering his work during their time in the north or they managed to trade something for some enhancements. The main thing she noticed was the calm both of them showed, not a speck of fear on their faces despite the dangerous magic they were about to play with. Nor were they overwhelmed by excitement.

Workbenches covered in tools, large books, and a single empty sheet of thick paper had been spread out before them. The two enchanters worked in tandem, dozens of runes noted down quickly as they deciphered the layers and connections.

Ilea finished her meal and spread her wings, floating over them to get a better look at the growing puzzle of symbols she didn't know.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone decipher runes that quickly," Verena said, the woman flying next to her.

"You understand any of it?" Ilea asked.

"Some. I learned about basic and advanced rune combinations when I became a Shadow. The more common systems are quite useful in ruins both in and beyond the human plains. A lot of traps can be disabled with some understanding and the right documentation," the Elder said.

Ilea huffed. "Yeah. I prefer to just trigger them."

"It's been a while since I used them too. I assume most enchantments or rune traps that could actually hurt me are using languages I never learned," the woman said. "They don't seem to be as limited in their knowledge."

"How complex are we talking? Is learning about advanced runes comparable to another alphabet?" Ilea asked.

Verena looked at her and smiled ever so slightly. "And here I thought I neglected my education."

"That actually hurts a little, coming from you," Ilea answered.

"I'm sure you'll survive. And no, there are far more runes in a single system than most languages will ever need letters. Pronunciation isn't an issue, nor is sentence structure. But as far as I understand it, runes can be linked and expanded with no theoretical limit," Verena said.

Ilea could believe as much, looking at the connections drawn before her. There were already a few hundred, various sections marked and comments added. "I assume the more you add the more unstable it gets?"

"Practically, yes. The margin for error just gets larger. And I believe it becomes exponential with certain combinations. The same is true for the mana required to activate certain fields. Many devastating rituals are known to powerful people all around the Plains but few of them could ever actually activate one," she explained.

"So the Meadow is pretty much working with perfect precision when it sets up those circles," Ilea mused. *And it puts them down near instantly.* "Blood magic can substitute the energy needed. I saw it in Baralia."

"Yes. Life, essence, mana. Heat can work too. Each form requires alterations," she said and sighed, looking up. She smiled. "Not my favorite topic, to be honest."

"You seem to know it quite well," Ilea said, crossing her arms.

"Easy to learn a few words in a new language. But something like this requires perfect fluency, in more than a few languages," the Elder said.

So they're monsters like me, she thought with a grin. *Just knowledge instead of levels.*

They watched the two work for another ten minutes until they stopped sketching.

Iana sighed and looked at Christopher. “This won’t be an easy one to crack.”

The others joined them at the main workbench.

“Owl, I need you to confirm a few things,” Christopher said and motioned to the being. “Can you help me levitate?”

“I can make a flying copy,” Ilea said but the Lich had already grabbed the significantly smaller enchanter.

Iana gave them a look for a second but returned her attention to the mesh they had drawn. “Alright. Whoever set this up knew what they were doing. And they most certainly didn’t want anyone getting inside without their permission.”

“Is it possible at all?” Bralin asked. “There are vaults in the Pit I deem pretty much unbreakable.”

“Enchantments are not living beings. They are static,” Iana said. “Once you have physical access, there is a way through. Practically speaking... neither me nor Christopher could get in there. I doubt even the Meadow could do it, not without triggering at least a few of the defensive measures.”

“If the Meadow couldn’t do it...,” Ilea murmured.

“The Meadow would know how to get in, but without a high level soul mage and enough heat to melt steel, it wouldn’t get much farther than anybody here alone,” the woman explained.

“Let me guess, there are lightning magic seals too,” Pierce said from within her repaired war machine.

Iana glanced at her. “No. Nothing for Aki either, I’m afraid. But just because we have the tools doesn’t mean it will be easy. You’re an earth mage, right?” she said, looking at Bralin with the last note.

“Yes. Bralin is the name,” he said.

“Great. Bralin. I take it you’ve broken into sealed off areas before?” Iana asked.

Owl landed with Christopher in tow, the man adding a few more notes before they flew off again.

The dwarf glanced at everyone looking at him. He chuckled. “Don’t think I can lie here.”

“Perfect. How precise can you be with your stone magic?” she asked.

“I build and repair war machines. Precise enough,” he said with a confident tone. “How extensive are we talking?”

Iana grinned. “The whole thing.”

He looked up at the cube and mirrored her expression. “That’s a piece of work.”

“So we better get working then,” the enchantress said when Owl landed again.

“Just a few complications, but we should be fine,” Christopher said as he added the notes. “Are we using Ilea’s ash? Or have the Meadow set up sheets based on our measurements?”

“Bralin will provide the setup. As an explanation for the others, we have to build a cover to mark the specific areas where each problematic enchantment has to be disabled. Me and Christopher will prepare foci for each enchantment and then we just have to perfectly time everyone’s magic to crack

this thing in the span of about a third of a second. Well, when I say everyone, mostly Ilea and Owl,” she explained.

Ilea looked at the Lich and gave her a nod. “Maybe we should work on our coordination for a while.”

“We’re going to need powerful attacks from the both of you. Train with that in mind,” Iana said as she summoned another sheet of paper. She summoned a few tools and started laying them out.

Christopher opened a notebook and started reading measurements, the woman following with a pen in real time.

Bralin chuckled to himself. “Professionals all around.” He summoned his own tools and nodded to Pierce. “Care to fly me around this thing? Always good to triple check the measurements.”

“Ask Verena. I need a bath after I lost all my gold,” the woman said and vanished into one of the basins.

“I can take you,” Aki said from above, stepping down with a few fluid movements.

Bralin took a step back, both arms raised. “Ah... sorry. Haven’t seen a Praetorian in a long time. Old habits.”

“I’m a Pursuer. It’s a far more dangerous model than the Praetorians,” Aki supplied, knowing full well what he was doing. His blades morphed into long fingered hands. “Ready?”

Bralin glanced to Ilea and raised a brow.

“He only sometimes loses control and kills allies,” she said and gave him a thumbs up.

He sighed and gave the machine a nod.

“Do you have any remaining information that may be important?” Verena asked, looking at the two Shades.

“We have already shared all with the enchantress,” one of them said.

“Direct observation is beyond the information passed down to us,” the other added.

“Great, so you prepare your thing. Call for me if anything comes up,” Ilea said and moved her wings.

Owl followed.

“You’re pretty quick with that hover,” Ilea said when they had gone a few hundred meters away.

“The acceleration is difficult to control. Far more powerful than it was before the ritual,” she said and closed her fist. “Perhaps a part of them lives on within me.”

“Do you have an urge to kill everyone you see?” Ilea asked.

“No,” she said and looked up with glowering eyes. “I do not.”

“Then I’m sure you’re fine,” she said with a smile and charged up her heat.